

## **ABSTRACT**

**DISSERTATION:** Hearing the voices of students: A phenomenological exploration of elementary youth leadership development

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While much research has been devoted to investigating leadership development, relatively few studies have specifically explored the leadership development experiences of elementary youth (Murphy, 2011) and even fewer have provided space for the voices of these youth (Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Roach, Wyman, Brookes, Chavez, Heath, & Valdes, 1999). Consequently, this phenomenological study seeks to understand the lived experiences with leadership development of elementary youth by gathering the perspectives of 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children through a series of six focus group interviews. From these discussions, the children drew pictures and discussed examples and elements of leadership as they had experienced it. Identifying themselves as helpful leaders, the participants characterized leadership as a combination of doing the right thing, showing kindness, and following the 7 Habits of *The Leader in Me* while acknowledging relationships with teachers, parents, and peers as helping contribute to their formation of leadership. Additionally, this study suggests a potential narrow understanding of leadership contributing to an emergence of the “Other.”